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(54) **TERMINAL ELEMENTS FOR COUPLING
CONNECTING RODS AND CONTROL RODS
IN CONTROL ROD ASSEMBLIES FOR A
NUCLEAR REACTOR**

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G21C 7/06 (2006.01)

(52) **U.S. Cl.**
USPC **376/219; 376/239; 376/236**

(58) **Field of Classification Search**
USPC **376/219, 236, 239**
See application file for complete search history.

(56) **References Cited**

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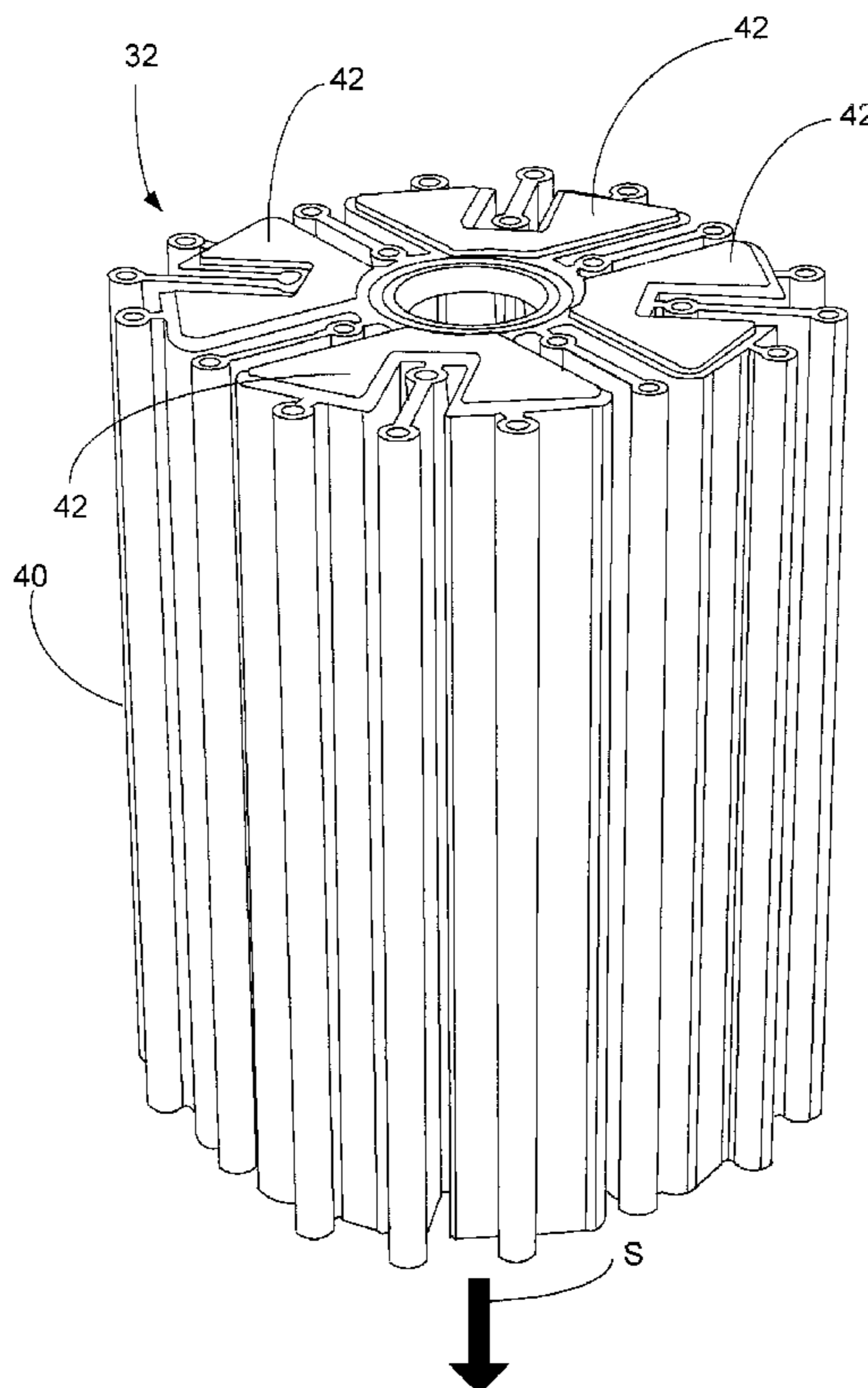
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Seymour

(57) **ABSTRACT**

A nuclear reactor includes a pressure vessel, and a control rod assembly (CRA) including at least one movable control rod, a control rod drive mechanism (CRDM) for controlling movement of the at least one control rod, and a coupling operatively connecting the at least one control rod and the CRDM. The coupling includes a connecting rod engaged with the CRDM and a terminal element connected with a lower end of the connecting rod and further connected with the at least one control rod. In some embodiments the terminal element includes a first portion comprising a first material having a first density and a second portion comprising a second material having a second density that is greater than the first density. In some embodiments the terminal element has a largest dimension parallel with the connecting rod that is greater than or equal to a largest dimension transverse to the connecting rod.

15 Claims, 11 Drawing Sheets



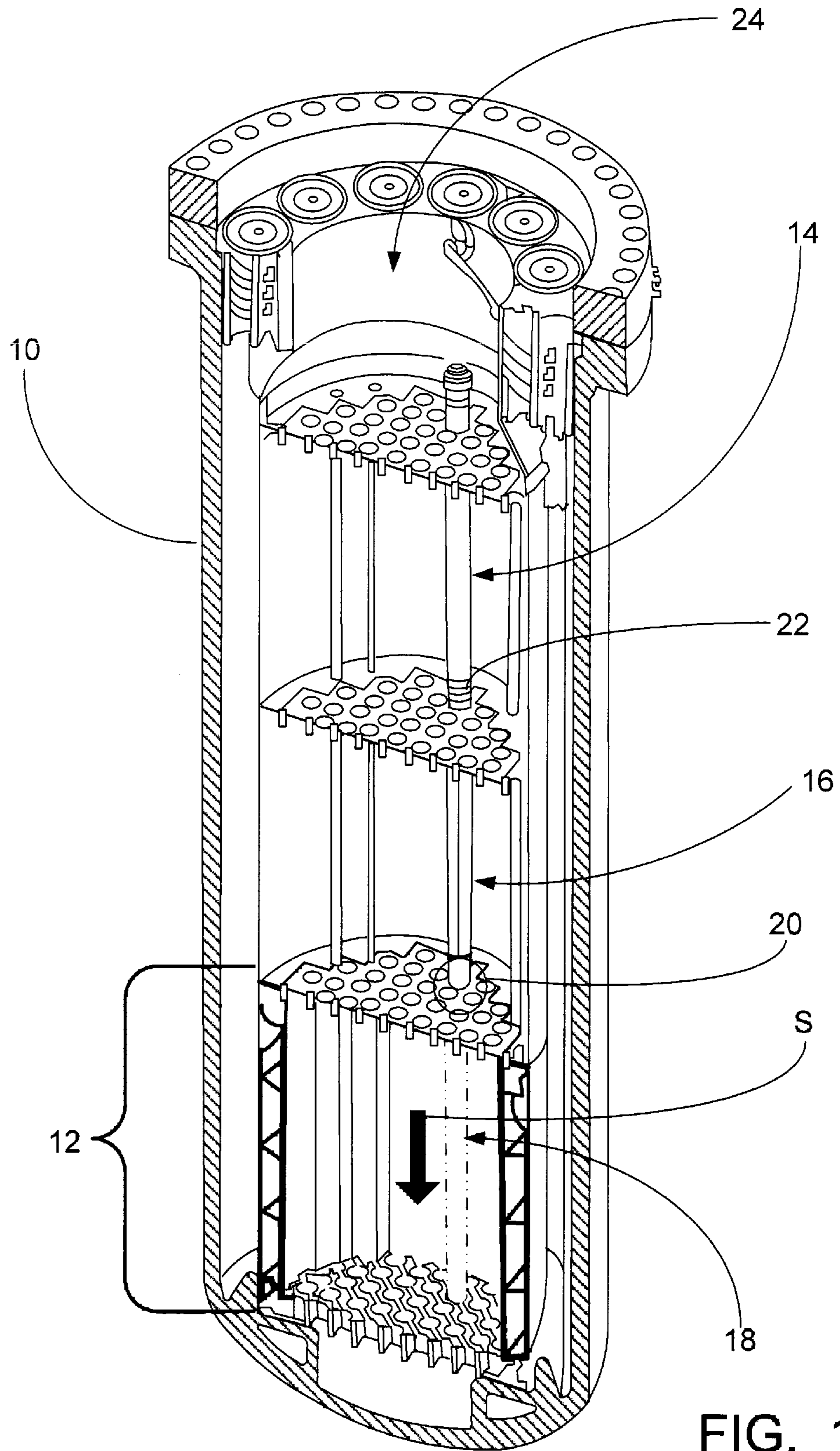
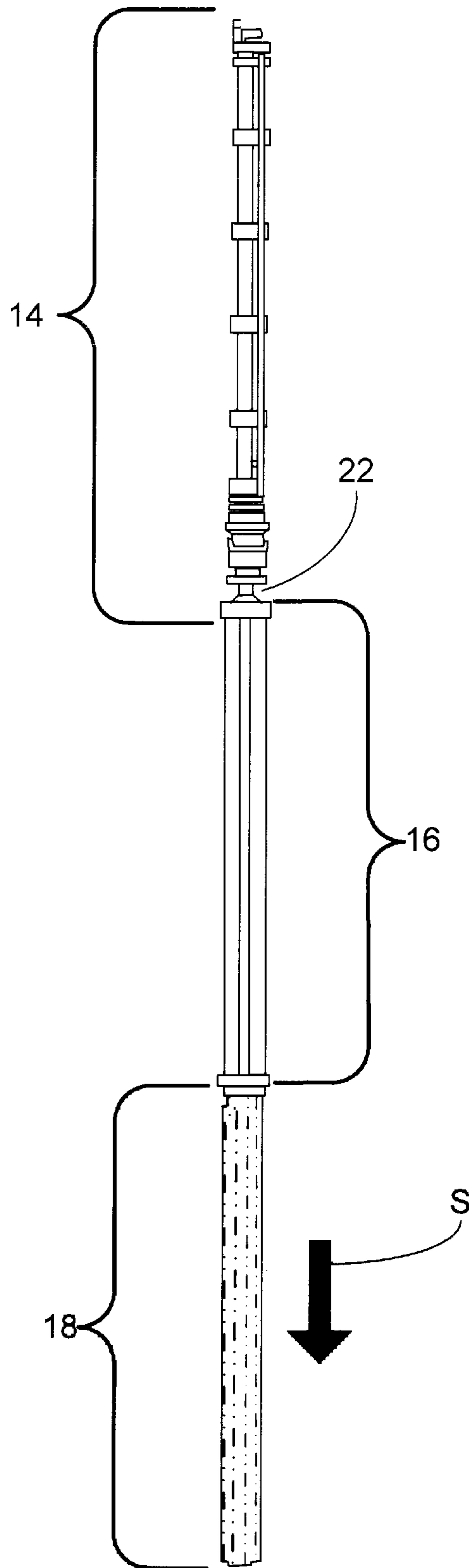


FIG. 1

FIG. 2



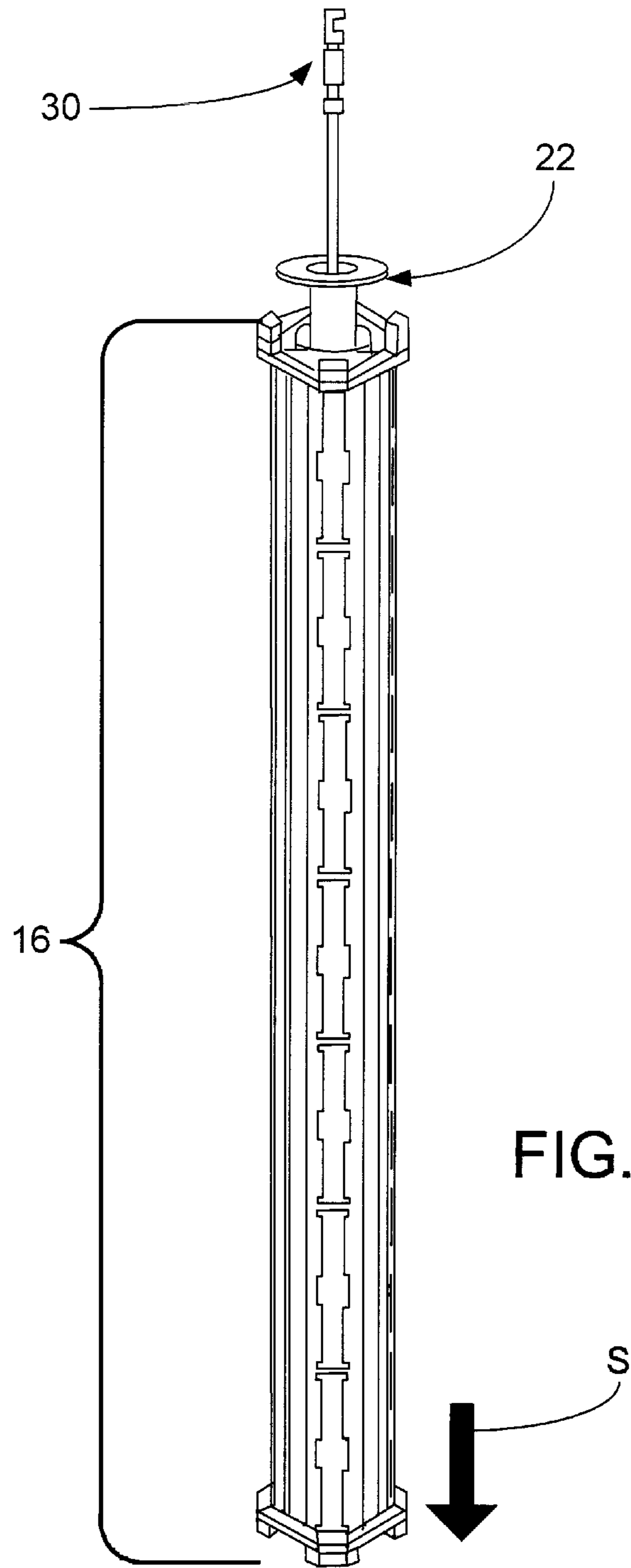
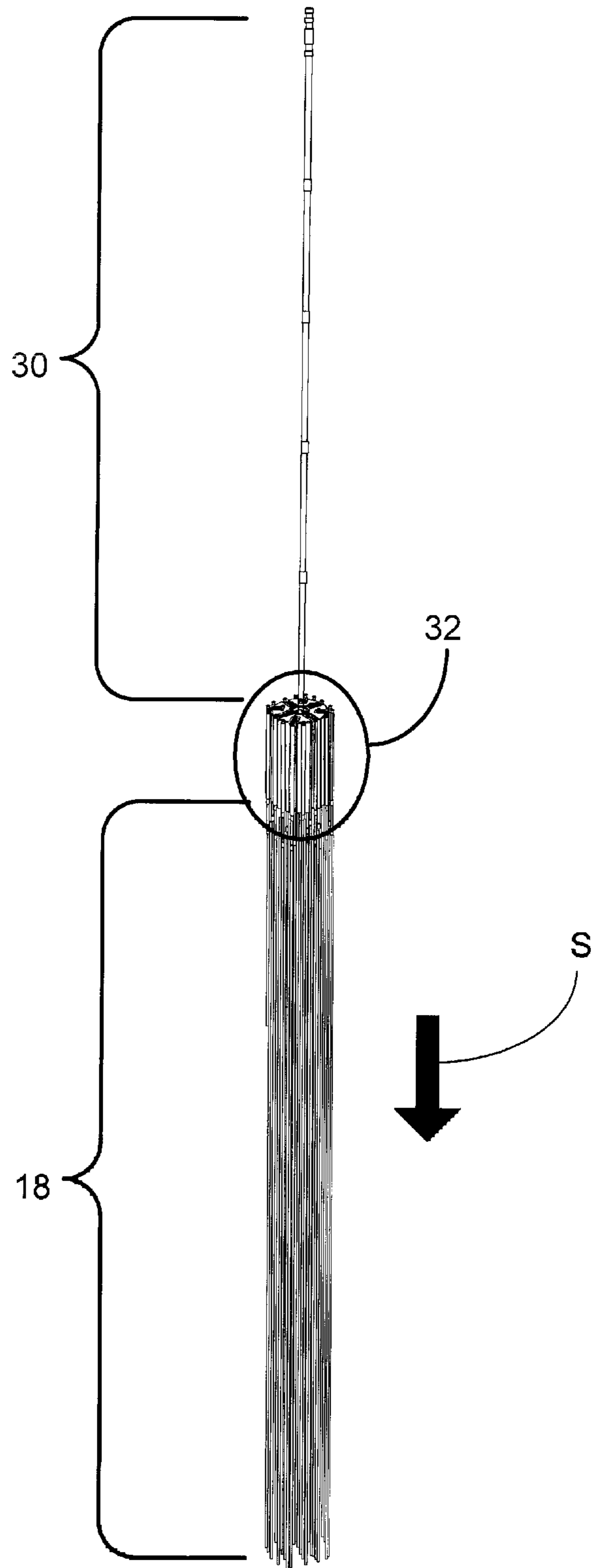


FIG. 3

FIG. 4



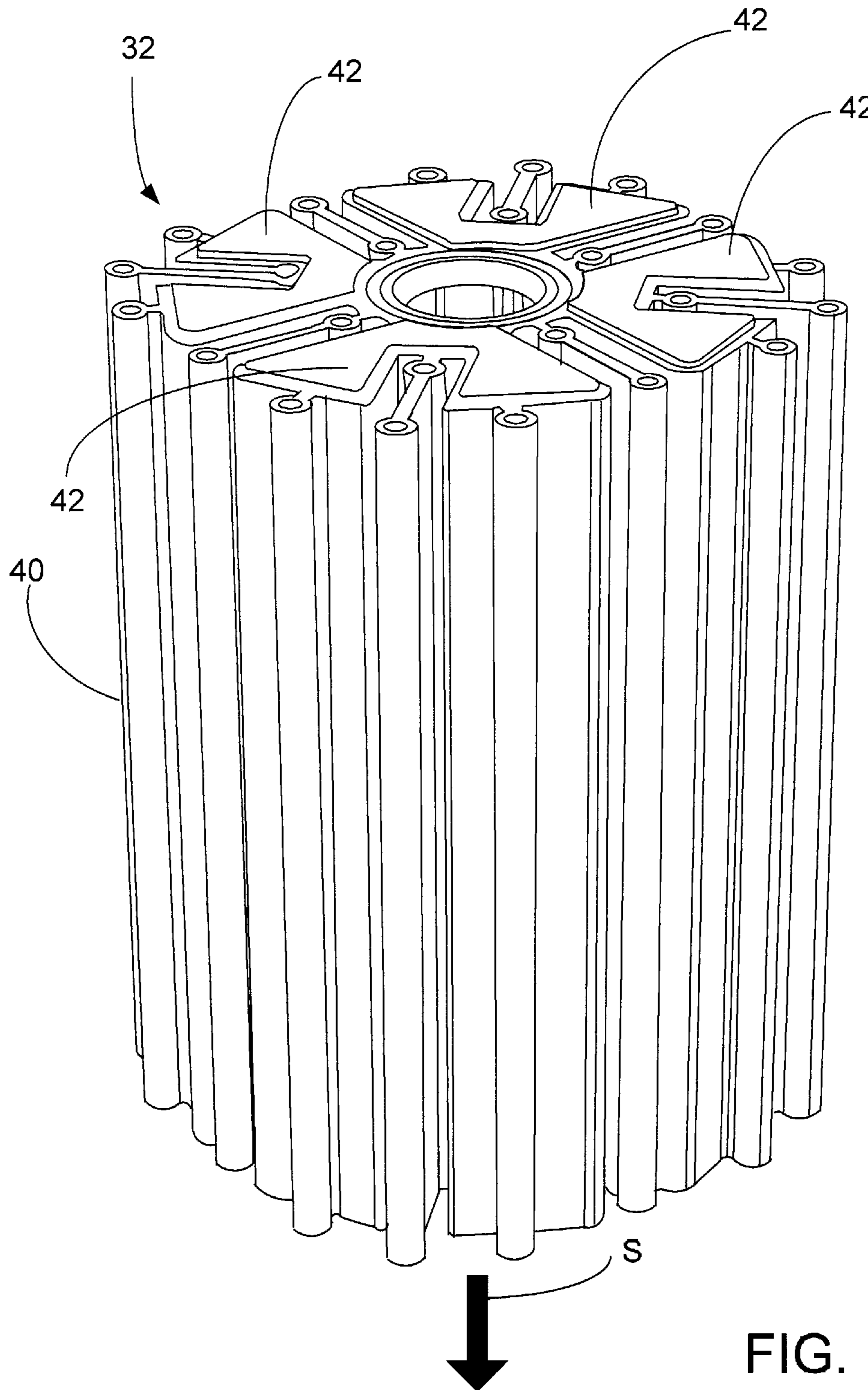


FIG. 5

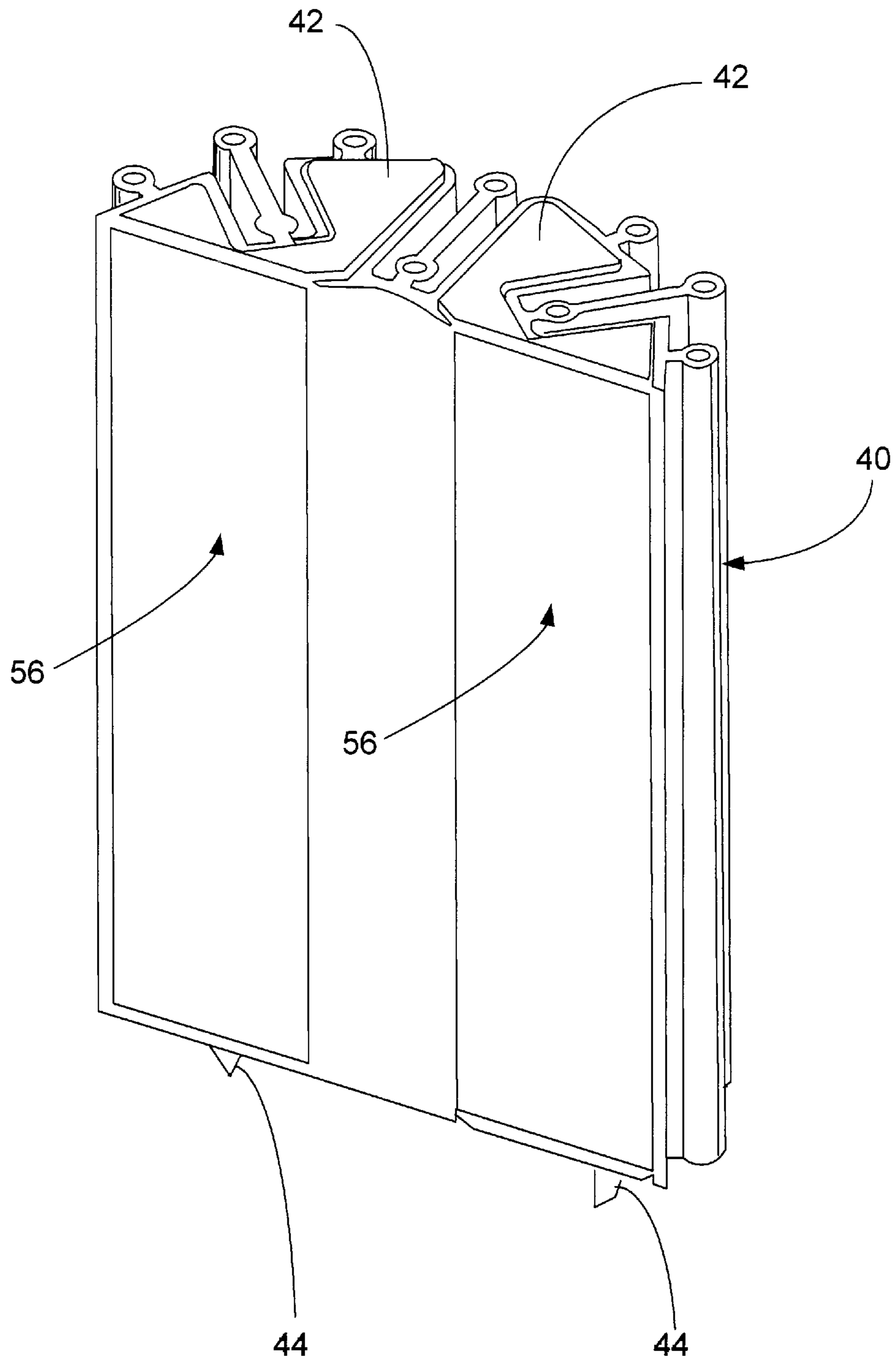


FIG. 6

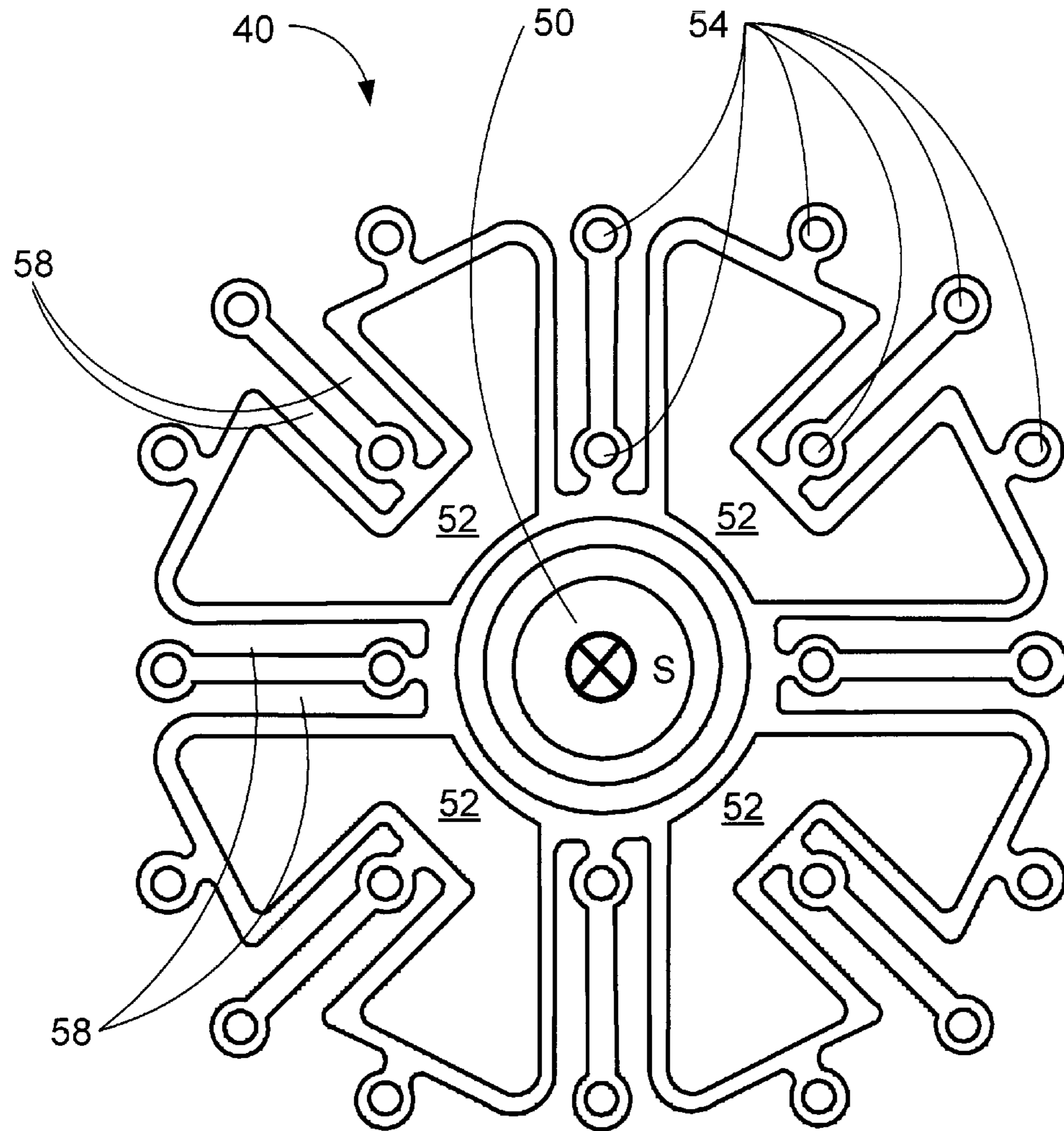


FIG. 7

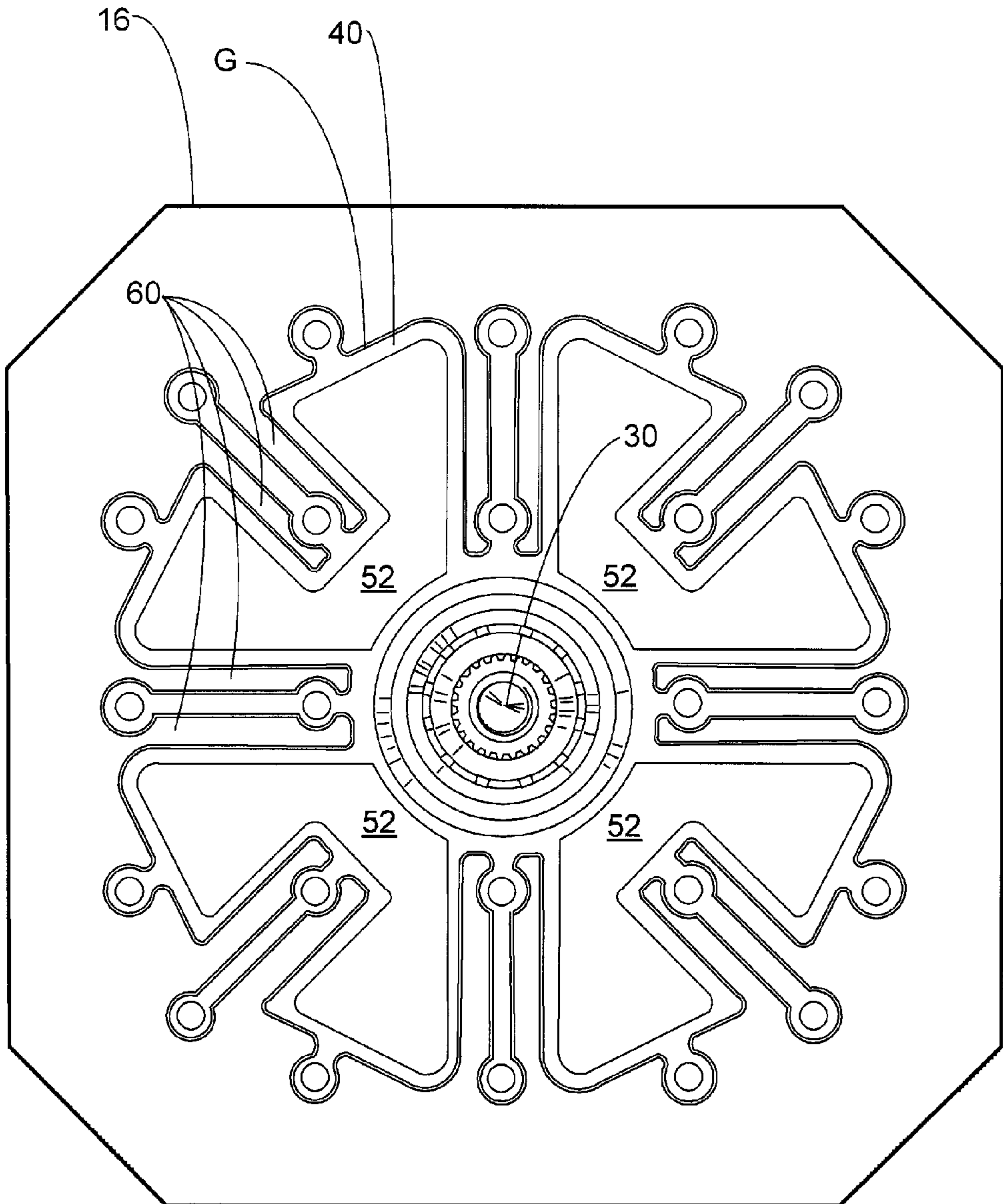


FIG. 8

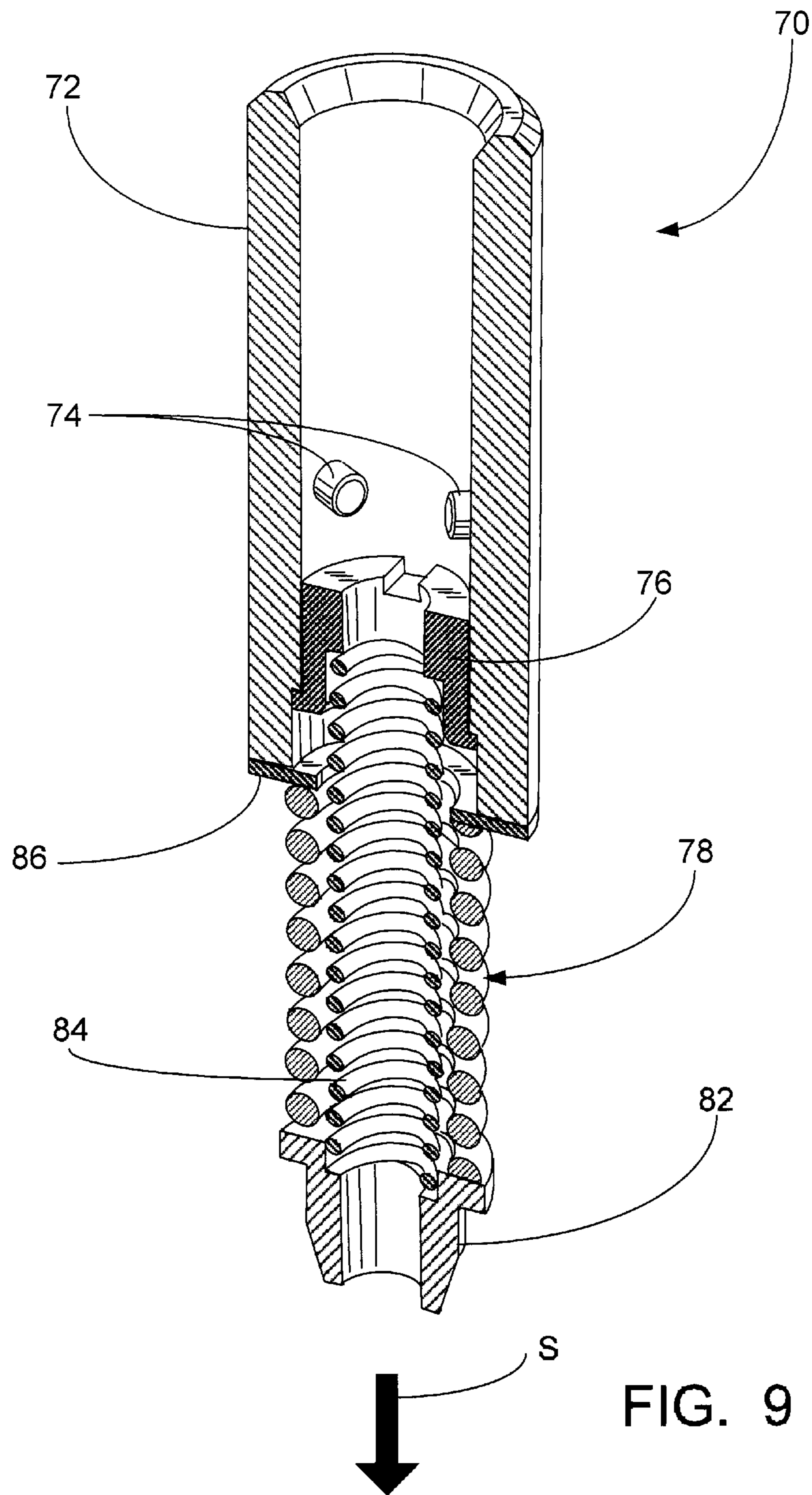


FIG. 9

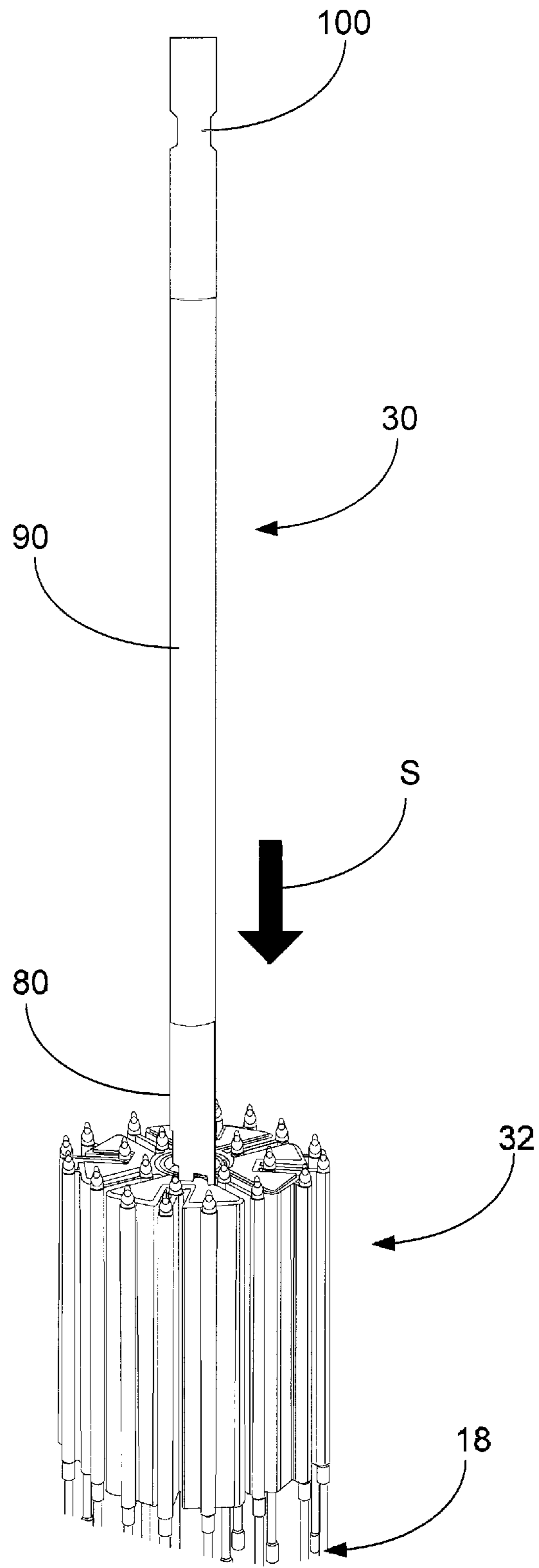
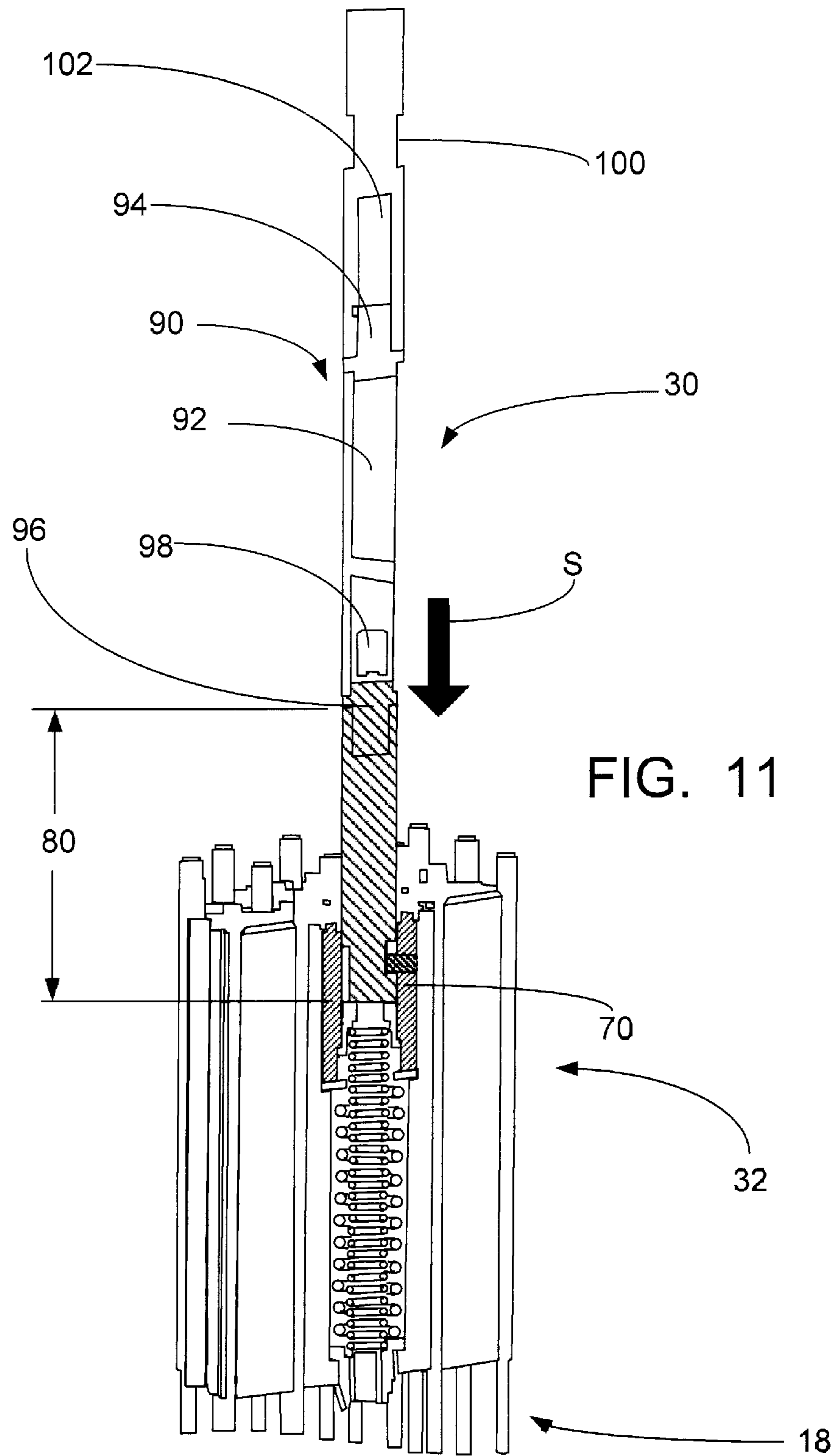


FIG. 10



**TERMINAL ELEMENTS FOR COUPLING
CONNECTING RODS AND CONTROL RODS
IN CONTROL ROD ASSEMBLIES FOR A
NUCLEAR REACTOR**

BACKGROUND

The following relates to the nuclear power reactor arts, nuclear reaction control apparatus arts, control rod assembly arts, and related arts.

In known nuclear power plants, a nuclear reactor core comprises a fissile material having size and composition selected to support a desired nuclear fission chain reaction. To moderate the reaction, a neutron absorbing medium may be provided, such as light water (H₂O) in the case of light water reactors, or heavy water (D₂O) in the case of heavy water reactors. It is further known to control or stop the reaction by inserting “control rods” comprising a neutron-absorbing material into aligned passages within the reactor core. When inserted, the control rods absorb neutrons so as to slow or stop the chain reaction.

The control rods are operated by control rod drive mechanisms (CRDMs). In so-called “gray” control rods, the insertion of the control rods is continuously adjustable so as to provide continuously adjustable reaction rate control. In so-called “shutdown” control rods, the insertion is either fully in or fully out. During normal operation the shutdown rods are fully retracted from the reactor core; during a SCRAM, the shutdown rods are rapidly fully inserted so as to rapidly stop the chain reaction. Control rods can also be designed to perform both gray rod and shutdown rod functions. In some such dual function control rods, the control rod is configured to be detachable from the CRDM in the event of a SCRAM, such that the detached control rod falls into the reactor core under the influence of gravity. In some systems, such as naval systems, a hydraulic pressure or other positive force (other than gravity) is also provided to drive the detached control rod into the core.

To complete the control system, a control rod/CRDM coupling is provided. A known coupling includes a connecting rod having a lower end at which the control rod is secured. The upper portion of the connecting rod operatively connects with the CRDM. A known CRDM providing gray rod functionality comprises a motor driving a lead screw that is integral with or rigidly connected with the connecting rod, such that operation of the motor can drive the lead screw and the integral or rigidly connected connecting rod up or down in a continuous fashion. A known CRDM providing shutdown functionality is configured to actively hold the control rod in the lifted position (that is, lifted out of the reactor core); in a SCRAM, the active lifting force is removed and the control rod and the integral or connected connecting rod fall together toward the reactor core (with the control rod actually entering into the reactor core). A known CRDM providing dual gray/shutdown functionality includes a motor/lead screw arrangement, and the connection between the motor and the lead screw is designed to release the lead screw during SCRAM. For example, the motor may be connected with the lead screw via a separable ball nut that is actively clamped to the lead screw during normal (gray) operation, and separates in the event of a SCRAM so that the control rod, the connecting rod, and the lead screw SCRAM together (that is, fall together toward the reactor core).

Related application Ser. No. 12/722,662 titled “Control Rod Drive Mechanism For Nuclear Reactor” filed Mar. 12, 2010 and related application Ser. No. 12/722,696 titled “Control Rod Drive Mechanism For Nuclear Reactor” filed Mar.

12, 2010 are both incorporated herein by reference in their entireties. These applications disclose configurations in which the connection between the motor and the lead screw is not releasable, but rather a separate latch is provided between the lead screw and the connecting rod in order to effectuate SCRAM. In these alternative configurations the lead screw does not SCRAM, but rather only the unlatched connecting rod and control rod SCRAM together toward the reactor core while the lead screw remains engaged with the motor.

The CRDM is a complex device, and is typically driven electrically and/or hydraulically. In the case of shutdown or dual gray/shutdown rods, the control rod system including the CRDM may also be classified as a safety related component—this status imposes strict reliability requirements on at least the shutdown functionality of the CRDM.

To reduce cost and overall system complexity, it is known to couple a single CRDM with a plurality of control rods via an additional coupling element known as a “spider”. In such a case all the control rods coupled with a single CRDM unit move together. In practice a number of CRDM units are provided, each of which is coupled with a plurality of control rods, so as to provide some redundancy. The spider extends laterally away from the lower end of the connecting rod to provide a large “surface area” for attachment of multiple control rods.

Although it is desired for the spider to have a large effective area, the spider also passes through the control rod support assembly. The support assembly guides the control rods as they are moved into or out of the reactor, so as to prevent control rod bowing or lateral movement of any control rod in any direction other than the desired “up/down” direction. The support assembly should cam against each control rod over a perimeter portion (transverse to the SCRAM direction) large enough to prevent rod bowing or lateral movement.

Another limitation on the spider’s effective area is that during a SCRAM the spider should not present a large hydraulic resistance that limits acceleration of the detached control rod/spider/connecting rod/(and, optionally, lead screw) assembly toward the reactor core during a SCRAM. Since the spider’s “effective surface” for attachment of rods is oriented broadside to the SCRAM direction, this is a substantial concern.

In view of these considerations, a spider typically comprises metal tubes or arms extending outward from a central attachment point at which the spider attaches with the connecting rod. In some spiders, additional supporting cross-members may be provided between the radially extending tubes, but the use of such cross-members is limited by the desire to minimize the actual area oriented broadside to the SCRAM direction. The diameters (or more generally, sizes) of the metal tubes or arms comprising the spider are kept as low as practicable in order to minimize hydraulic resistance of the spider during SCRAM and to enable the control rod support structure to contact and cam against all control rods during raising or lowering of the control rods. The spider is thus a lightweight, “spidery” structure having large lateral openings between the tubes or arms to reduce the actual surface area oriented broadside to the SCRAM direction. For various reasons such as strength and robustness, low cost, manufacturability, and compatibility with the reactor vessel environment, both the connecting rod and the spider are usually stainless steel elements.

BRIEF SUMMARY

In one aspect of the disclosure, a control rod/control rod drive mechanism (CRDM) coupling comprises a connecting

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rod operatively connected with a CRDM unit to provide at least one of gray rod control functionality and shutdown rod control functionality, and a terminal element connected with a lower end of the connecting rod, the terminal element including a casing defining at least one cavity and a filler disposed in the at least one cavity. The filler comprises heavy material having a higher density than a material comprising the casing. The terminal element is further connected with an upper end of at least one control rod.

In another aspect of the disclosure, an apparatus comprises a terminal element adapted to connect a lower end of a connecting rod with at least one control rod of a nuclear reactor. The terminal element has an average density that is greater than the density of stainless steel.

In another aspect of the disclosure, a control rod/control rod drive mechanism (CRDM) coupling comprises a connecting rod operatively connected with a CRDM unit to provide at least one of gray rod control functionality and shutdown rod control functionality, and a terminal element connected with a lower end of the connecting rod. The terminal element has elongation in a SCRAM direction that is at least as large as a largest dimension of the terminal element transverse to the SCRAM direction. The terminal element is further connected with an upper end of at least one control rod.

In another aspect of the disclosure, an apparatus comprises a nuclear reactor pressure vessel and a control rod assembly including at least one movable control rod comprising a neutron absorbing material, a control rod drive mechanism (CRDM) for controlling movement of the at least one control rod, and a coupling operatively connecting the at least one control rod and the CRDM. The coupling includes a connecting rod engaged with the CRDM and a terminal element connected with a lower end of the connecting rod. The terminal element includes a first portion comprising a first material having a first density and a second portion comprising a second material having a second density that is greater than the first density. The terminal element is further connected with the at least one control rod.

In another aspect of the disclosure, an apparatus comprises a nuclear reactor pressure vessel and a control rod assembly including at least one movable control rod comprising a neutron absorbing material, a control rod drive mechanism (CRDM) for controlling movement of the at least one control rod, and a coupling operatively connecting the at least one control rod and the CRDM. The coupling includes a connecting rod engaged with the CRDM and a terminal element connected with a lower end of the connecting rod. The terminal element has a largest dimension parallel with the connecting rod that is greater than or equal to a largest dimension transverse to the connecting rod.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The invention may take form in various components and arrangements of components, and in various process operations and arrangements of process operations. The drawings are only for purposes of illustrating preferred embodiments and are not to be construed as limiting the invention.

FIG. 1 diagrammatically shows a perspective sectional view a lower portion of an illustrative nuclear reactor pressure vessel including an illustrative control rod assembly (CRA).

FIG. 2 diagrammatically shows a perspective view of the illustrative CRA of FIG. 1.

FIG. 3 diagrammatically shows a perspective view of the control rod guide frame with the CRDM unit removed so as to reveal an upper end of a connecting rod of the CRA.

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FIG. 4 diagrammatically shows a perspective view the control rods and the connecting rod of the CRA of FIGS. 1-3, with components that would occlude the view of these components removed.

FIG. 5 diagrammatically shows a perspective view of the terminal weighting element of the CRA of FIGS. 1-4.

FIG. 6 diagrammatically shows a perspective sectional view of the terminal weighting element of FIG. 5.

FIG. 7 diagrammatically shows a top view of a casing of the terminal weighting element of FIGS. 5 and 6.

FIG. 8 diagrammatically shows a top view of the casing of the terminal weighting element of FIGS. 5-7 located in the control rod guide frame of the CRA of FIGS. 1-3.

FIG. 9 diagrammatically shows a perspective sectional view of the J-Lock female attachment assembly housed or disposed in the central passage of the terminal weighting element of FIGS. 5-7.

FIG. 10 diagrammatically shows a perspective view of the assembly of the connecting rod, terminal weighting element, and control rods including an upper portion of the J-Lock coupling.

FIG. 11 diagrammatically shows a perspective sectional view of the assembly of the connecting rod, terminal weighting element, and control rods including details of the J-Lock coupling in its locked configuration.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

Disclosed herein is a paradigm shift in control rod/CRDM coupling assemblies. In existing control rod/CRDM coupling assemblies, the control rod is terminated by a lightweight, "spidery" spider having a minimal weight and surface area oriented broadside to the SCRAM direction. The spider is configured to provide a large "effective" area for attachment of control rods, but a small "actual" area contributing to hydraulic resistance during SCRAM. Both the spider and the connecting rod are stainless steel components so as to provide benefits such as strength and robustness, low cost, manufacturability, and compatibility with the reactor vessel environment.

Disclosed herein are control rod/CRDM coupling assemblies that include one or both of the following aspects: (i) replacement of the conventional lightweight spider with a terminal weighting element, and/or (ii) replacement of a substantial portion of the stainless steel of the control rod/CRDM coupling assembly with a denser material such as tungsten (optionally in a powdered or granulated form), molybdenum, tantalum, or so forth. The disclosed control rod/CRDM coupling assemblies are substantially heavier than conventional connecting rod/spider assemblies, which advantageously enhances the speed and reliability of gravitationally-induced SCRAM.

In the case of control rod/CRDM coupling assemblies employing the disclosed terminal weighting element, the increased weight provided by the terminal weighting element as compared with a conventional lightweight spider enables the terminal weighting element to optionally have a larger actual surface area broadside to the SCRAM direction (for example, in order to provide the additional weight) as compared with the conventional spider.

With reference to FIG. 1, a relevant portion of an illustrative nuclear reactor pressure vessel 10 includes a core former 12 located proximate to a bottom of the pressure vessel 10. The core former 12 includes or contains a reactive core (not shown) containing or including radioactive material such as, by way of illustrative example, enriched uranium oxide (that

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is, UO_2 processed to have an elevated $^{235}\text{U}/^{238}\text{U}$ ratio). A control rod drive mechanism (CRDM) unit **14** is diagrammatically illustrated. The illustrative CRDM **14** is an internal CRDM that is disposed within the pressure vessel **10**; alternatively, an external CRDM may be employed. FIG. **1** shows the single illustrated CRDM unit **14** as an illustrative example; however, more generally there are typically multiple CRDM units each coupled with a different plurality of control rods (although these additional CRDM units are not shown in FIG. **1**, the pressure vessel **10** is drawn showing the space for such additional CRDM units).

Below the CRDM unit **14** is a control rod guide frame **16**, which in the perspective view of FIG. **1** blocks from view the control rod/CRDM coupling assembly (not shown in FIG. **1**). Extending below the guide frame **16** are a plurality of control rods **18**. FIG. **1** shows the control rods **18** in their fully inserted position in which the control rods **18** are maximally inserted into the core former **12**. In the fully inserted position, the terminal weighting element (or, in alternative embodiments, the spider) is located at a lower location **20** within the control rod guide frame **16** (and, again, hence not visible in FIG. **1**). In the illustrative embodiment of FIG. **1**, the CRDM unit **14** and the control rod guide frame **16** are spaced apart by a standoff **22** comprising a hollow tube having opposite ends coupled with the CRDM unit **14** and the guide frame **16**, respectively, and through which the connecting rod (not shown in FIG. **1**) passes.

FIG. **1** shows only a lower portion of the illustrative pressure vessel **10**. In an operating nuclear reactor, an open upper end **24** of the illustration is connected with one or more upper pressure vessel portions that together with the illustrated lower portion of the pressure vessel **10** form an enclosed pressure volume containing the reactor core (indicated by the illustrated core former **12**), the control rods **18**, the guide frame **16**, and the internal CRDM unit **14**. In an alternative embodiment, the CRDM unit is external, located above the reactor pressure vessel. In such embodiments, the external CRDM is connected with the control rods by a control rod/CRDM coupling assembly in which the connecting rod extends through a portal in the upper portion of the pressure vessel.

With reference to FIG. **2**, the control assembly including the CRDM unit **14**, the control rod guide frame **16**, the intervening standoff **22**, and the control rods **18** is illustrated isolated from the reactor pressure vessel. Again, the control rod/CRDM coupling assembly is hidden by the control rod guide frame **16** and the standoff **22** in the view of FIG. **2**.

With reference to FIG. **3**, the control rod guide frame **16** and the standoff **22** is again illustrated, but with the CRDM unit removed so as to reveal an upper end of a connecting rod **30** extending upwardly above the standoff **22**. If the CRDM unit has gray rod functionality, then this illustrated upper end of the connecting rod **30** engages with the CRDM unit to enable the CRDM unit to raise or lower the control rod **30** and, hence, the attached control rods **18** (not shown in FIG. **3**). If the CRDM unit has shutdown rod functionality, then this illustrated upper end is detachable from the CRDM unit during SCRAM. In each of FIGS. **1-4**, a SCRAM direction **S** is indicated, which is the downward direction of acceleration of the falling control rods in the event of a SCRAM.

With reference to FIG. **4**, the control rods **18** and the connecting rod **30** are shown without any of the occluding components (e.g., without the guide frame, standoff, or CRDM unit). In the view of FIG. **4** an illustrative terminal weighting element **32** is visible, which provides connection of the plurality of control rods **18** with the lower end of the connecting rod **30**. It will be noticed that, unlike a conven-

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tional spider, the terminal weighting element **32** has substantial elongation along the SCRAM direction **S**. The illustrated terminal weighting element **32** has the advantage of providing enhanced weight which facilitates rapid SCRAM; however, it is also contemplated to replace the illustrated terminal weighting element **32** with a conventional "spidery" spider.

With reference to FIGS. **5** and **6**, a perspective view and a side-sectional perspective view, respectively, of the terminal weighting element **32** is shown. The terminal weighting element **32** includes a substantially hollow casing **40** having upper and lower ends that are sealed off by upper and lower casing cover plates **42**, **44**. Four upper casing cover plates **42** are illustrated in FIG. **5** and two of the upper casing cover plates **42** are shown in the side-sectional perspective view of FIG. **6**. The tilt of the perspective view of FIG. **5** occludes the lower cover plates from view, but two of the lower cover plates **44** are visible "on-edge" in the side-sectional view of FIG. **6**. The illustrative terminal weighting element **32** includes four lower casing cover plates **44** arranged analogously to the four upper casing cover plates **42** illustrated in FIG. **5**.

Further visualization of the illustrative terminal weighting element **32** is provided by FIG. **7**, which shows a top view of the hollow casing **40** with the cover plates omitted. As seen in FIG. **7**, the hollow casing **40** is cylindrical having a cylinder axis parallel with the SCRAM direction **S** and a uniform cross-section transverse to the cylinder axis. That cross-section is complex, and defines a central passage **50** and four cavities **52** spaced radially at 90° intervals around the central passage **50**. The cross-section of the hollow casing **40** also defines twenty-four small passages **54** (that is, small compared with the central passage **50**), of which only some of the twenty-four small passages **54** are expressly labeled in FIG. **7**. Comparison of FIG. **7** with FIGS. **5** and **6** show that the passages **50**, **54** each pass completely through the casing **40** and are not covered by the upper or lower cover plates **42**, **44**.

Considering first the twenty-four small passages **54**, these provide structures for securing the plurality of control rods **18**. In some embodiments, each of the twenty-four of the small passages **54** retain a control rod, such that the plurality of control rods **18** consists of precisely twenty-four control rods. In other embodiments, one or more of the twenty-four small passages **54** may be empty or may be used for another purpose, such as being used as a conduit for in-core instrumentation wiring, in which case the plurality of control rods **18** consists of fewer than twenty-four control rods. It is to be further appreciated that the terminal weighting element **32** is merely an illustrative example, and that the terminal weighting element may have other cross-sectional configurations that provide for different numbers of control rods, e.g. more or fewer than twenty-four.

The four cavities **52** spaced radially at 90° intervals around the central passage **50** are next considered. The substantially hollow casing **40** and the upper and lower cover plates **42**, **44** are suitably made of stainless steel, although other materials are also contemplated. The upper and lower cover plates **42**, **44** seal the four cavities **52**. As shown in the side-sectional view of FIG. **6**, the four cavities **52** are filled with a filler **56** comprising a heavy material, where the term "heavy material" denotes a material that has a higher density than the stainless steel (or other material) that forms the hollow casing **40**. For example, the filler **56** may comprise a heavy material such as tungsten (optionally in a powdered or granulated form), depleted uranium, molybdenum, or tantalum, by way of some illustrative examples. By way of illustrative example, stainless steel has a density of about 7.5-8.1 grams/cubic centimeter, while tungsten has a density of about 19.2 grams/

cubic centimeter and tantalum has a density of about 16.6 grams per cubic centimeter. In some preferred embodiments, the heavy material comprising the filler **56** has a density that is at least twice the density of the material comprising the casing **40**. In some preferred embodiments in which the casing **40** comprises stainless steel, the heavy material comprising the filler **56** preferably has a density that is at least 16.2 grams per cubic centimeter. (All quantitative densities specified herein are for room temperature.)

In some embodiments, the filler **56** does not contribute to the structural strength or rigidity of the terminal weighting element **32**. Accordingly, heavy material comprising the filler **56** can be selected without consideration of its mechanical properties. For the same reason, the filler **56** can be in the form of solid inserts sized and shaped to fit into the cavities **52**, or the filler **56** can be a powder, granulation, or other constitution. The cover plates **42**, **44** seal the cavities **52**, and so it is also contemplated for the heavy material comprising the filler **56** to be a material that is not compatible with the primary coolant flowing in the pressure vessel **10**. Alternatively, if the heavy material comprising the filler **56** is a material that is compatible with the primary coolant flowing in the pressure vessel **10**, then it is contemplated to omit the upper cover plates **42**, in which case the cavities **52** are not sealed. Indeed, if the filler **56** is a solid material securely held inside the cavities **52**, then it is contemplated to omit both the upper cover plates **42** and the lower cover plates **44**.

With continuing reference to FIGS. **5-7** and with further reference to FIG. **8**, the terminal weighting element **32** passes through the control rod guide frame **16** as the control rods **18** are raised or lowered by action of the CRDM unit **14**. The cylindrical configuration with constant cross-section over the length of the terminal weighting element **32** along the SCRAM direction **S** simplifies this design aspect. Moreover, the control rod guide frame **16** should cam against each control rod **18** to provide the desired control rod guidance. Toward this end, the cross-section of the terminal weighting element **32** is designed with recesses **58** (some of which are labeled in FIG. **7**). As shown in FIG. **8**, into these recesses **58** fit mating extensions **60** of the control rod guide frame **16**. A gap **G** also indicated in FIG. **8** provides a small tolerance between the outer surface of the terminal weighting element **32** and the proximate surface of the control rod guide frame **16**. The twenty-four partial circular openings of the guide frame **16** which encompass the twenty-four small passages **54** of the terminal weighting element **32** are sized to cam against the control rods **18**. For completeness, FIG. **8** also shows the connecting rod **30** disposed inside the central passage **50** of the terminal weighting element **32**.

FIGS. **5-7** show that providing space for the four cavities **52** substantially increases the actual cross-sectional area of the terminal weighting element **32** (that is, the area arranged broadside to the SCRAM direction **S**), as compared with the actual cross-sectional area that could be achieved without these four cavities **52**. In some embodiments, the "fill factor" for the cross-section oriented broadside to the SCRAM direction **S** (including the area encompassed by the cover plates **42**, **44**) is at least 50%, and FIG. **7** demonstrates that the fill factor is substantially greater than 50% for the illustrative terminal weighting element. Thus, the design of the terminal weighting element **32** is distinct from the "spidery" design of a typical spider, which is optimized to minimize the actual surface area broadside to the SCRAM direction **S** and generally has a fill factor of substantially less than 50% in order to reduce hydraulic resistance. In general, the SCRAM force achieved by the weight of the terminal weighting element **32**

more than offsets the increased hydraulic resistance of the greater actual broadside surface area imposed by the four cavities **52**.

Additional weight to overcome the hydraulic resistance and enhance SCRAM speed is obtained by elongating the terminal weighting element **32** in the SCRAM direction **S**. Said another way, a ratio of a length of the terminal weighting element **32** in the SCRAM direction **S** versus the largest dimension oriented broadside to the SCRAM direction **S** is optionally equal to or greater than one, and is more preferably equal to or greater than 1.2. The illustrative terminal weighting element **32** is not a generally planar element as per a typical spider, but rather is a volumetric component that provides substantial terminal weight to the lower end of the connecting rod **30**.

The illustrative terminal weighting element **32** has a substantial advantage in that it places the filler **56** comprising heavy material between the radioactive core (contained in or supported by the core former **12** located proximate to the bottom of the pressure vessel **10** as shown in FIG. **1**) and the CRDM unit **14**. The heavy material comprising the filler **56** is a dense material which can generally be expected to be highly absorbing for radiation generated by the reactor core. High radiation absorption is a property of heavy materials such as tungsten, depleted uranium, molybdenum, or tantalum, by way of illustrative example. Thus, the filler **56** comprising heavy material provides radiation shielding that protects the expensive and (in some embodiments and to various extent) radiation-sensitive CRDM unit **14**.

The elongation of the terminal weighting element **32** in the SCRAM direction **S** has additional benefits that are independent of providing weight. The elongation in the SCRAM direction **S** provides a longer length over which each control rod **18** can be secured to the terminal weighting element **32**, and similarly provides a longer length over which the connecting rod **30** can be secured to the terminal weighting element **32**. This provides a better mechanical coupling, and also provides enhanced stabilizing torque to prevent the control rods **18** from tilting. In general, the elongation of the terminal weighting element **32** in the SCRAM direction **S** provides a more rigid mechanical structure that reduces the likelihood of problematic (or even catastrophic) deformation of the connecting rod/terminal weighting element/control rods assembly.

Another advantage of the elongation of the terminal weighting element **32** in the SCRAM direction **S** is that it optionally allows for streamlining the terminal weighting element **32** in the SCRAM direction **S**. This variation is not illustrated; however, it is contemplated to modify the configuration of FIG. **5** (by way of illustrative example) to have a narrower lower cross-section and a broader upper cross section, with a conical surface of increasing diameter running from the narrower lower cross-section to the broader upper cross section. The small passages **54** for securing the control rods would remain oriented precisely parallel with the SCRAM direction **S** (and, hence, would be shorter for control rods located at the outermost positions). Such streamlining represents a trade-off between hydraulic resistance (reduced by the streamlining) and weight reduction caused by the streamlining.

Instead of the mentioned optional streamlining, the cross-section of the terminal weighting element can be otherwise configured to reduce hydraulic resistance. For example, the cross-section can include additional passages (not shown) analogous to the small passages **54**, but which are not filled with control rods or anything else, and instead provide fluid

flow paths to reduce the hydraulic resistance of the terminal weighting element during a SCRAM.

The illustrative terminal weighting element **32** provides a desired weight by a combination of the filler **56** comprising a heavy material (which increases the average density of the terminal weighting element **32** to a value greater than the average density of stainless steel) and the elongation of the terminal weighting element **32** (which increases the total volume of the terminal weighting element **32**). The total mass (equivalent to weight) is given by the product of the volume and the average density. To achieve a desired weight, various design trade-offs can be made amongst: (1) the size or amount or volume of the filler **56**; (2) the density of the heavy material comprising the filler **56**; and (3) the elongation of the terminal weighting element **32**.

In some embodiments, it is contemplated to achieve the desired weight by using a filler comprising a heavy material without elongating the terminal weighting element. In such embodiments, the terminal weighting element **32** may optionally have a conventional substantially planar and “spidery” spider configuration, in which the tubes or other connecting elements of the spider are partially or wholly hollow to define cavities containing the filler comprising a heavy material. Such a terminal weighting element can be thought of as a “heavy spider”.

In other embodiments, it is contemplated to omit the filler material entirely, and instead to rely entirely upon elongation to provide the desired weight. For example, the illustrated terminal weighting element **32** can be modified by omitting the four cavities **52** and the filler **56**. In this configuration the casing **40** can be replaced by a single solid stainless steel element having the same outer perimeter as the casing **40**, with the top and bottom of the single solid stainless steel element defining (or perhaps better stated, replacing) the upper and lower casing cover plates **42**, **44**. Such embodiments omitting the filler comprising heavy material are suitably employed if the elongated terminal weighting element **32** made entirely of stainless steel provides sufficient weight. Such embodiments are also suitably employed if the weight of the terminal element is not a consideration, but other benefits of the elongated terminal element are desired, such as providing a longer length for secure connection with the control rods and/or the connecting rod **30**, or providing an elongated geometry in the SCRAM direction *S* which is amenable to streamlining.

Various embodiments of the disclosed terminal weighting elements use a stainless steel casing that does not compromise the primary function of providing a suitable structure for coupling the control rods to the lower end of the connecting rod. At the same time, the stainless steel casing leaves sufficient void or cavity volume to allow a filler comprising a heavy material to be inserted. Although stainless steel is referenced as a preferred material for the casing, it is to be understood that other materials having desired structural characteristics and reactor pressure vessel compatibility can also be used. The filler comprising heavy material is suitably tungsten, depleted uranium, or another suitably dense material.

Various embodiments of the disclosed terminal weighting elements also have elongation in the SCRAM direction *S*. This elongated design is readily configured to fit into the control rod guide frame without any redesign (e.g., widening) of the guide frame, and hence does not impact the space envelope of the overall control rod assembly. The elongation is an adjustable design parameter, and can be set larger or smaller to provide the desired weight. Increasing the elongation generally increases the control rod assembly height, and

this may impose an upper limit on the elongation for a particular reactor design. (This may be at least partially compensated by reducing the connecting rod length, but the connecting rod has a minimum length imposed by the desired maximum travel).

Another advantage of the disclosed terminal weighting element is that it can provide adjustable weight. For example, in some embodiments different CRDM units may be located at different heights, or may support control rods of different masses, such that the different translating assemblies associated with the different CRDM units are not identical. If it is deemed beneficial for all translating assemblies associated with the various CRDM units to have the same weight, then different amounts of the filler comprising heavy material can be included in the cavities **52** of different terminal weighting elements **32** in order to equalize the weights of the translating assemblies. In some cases this might result in some cavities **52** being only partially filled with the filler **56**. Optionally, the unfilled space of the cavities **52** can be filled with a light weight filler material such as a stainless steel slug (not shown) or can contain a compressed loading spring (not shown) to prevent the filler **56** comprising heavy material from moving about within the cavities **52**. The weight of the light weight filler or loading spring is suitably taken into account in selecting the amount of filler **56** of heavy material to achieve a desired overall weight. Equalizing weights of the various translating assemblies can be useful, by way of example, to allow the use of a common plunger or other kinetic energy absorbing element in each translating assembly. The kinetic energy absorbing element (not shown) is designed to provide a “soft stop” to a translating assembly undergoing SCRAM when the control rods reach the point of full (i.e., maximal) insertion.

The casing **40** of the illustrative terminal weighting element **32** acts as the structural part providing mechanical support. All loads associated with the coupling between the connecting rod **30** and the control rods **18** are transferred into the casing **40** which serves as the attachment location for each control rod.

With reference to FIGS. **9**, **10**, and **11**, various attachment configurations can be used for securing the connecting rod **30** in the attachment passage **50** of the casing **40** of the terminal weighting element **32**. In an illustrative example of one such attachment configuration, the central passage **50** of the casing **40** houses a J-Lock female attachment assembly **70**, which is suitably coaxially disposed inside the central passage **50** of the casing **40**. FIG. **9** illustrates a side sectional view of the J-Lock female attachment assembly **70**, while FIG. **10** shows a side view of the connected assembly and FIG. **11** shows a side sectional view of the connected assembly. With particular reference to FIG. **9**, the illustrative J-Lock female attachment assembly **70** includes a hub **72** which in the illustrative embodiment comprises a round cylinder coaxially welded or otherwise secured in the central passage **50** of the casing **40**. Alternatively, the hub may be integral with or defined by an inside surface of the central passage **50**. The hub **72** serves as an interface between the casing **40** and the J-Lock female attachment components, which include three J-Lock pins **74** (two of which visible in the sectional view of FIG. **9**) disposed inside of the hub **72**. These pins **74** provide the connection points for a J-Lock male attachment assembly **80** (see FIG. **11**) disposed at the lower end of the connecting rod **30**. A J-Lock plunger **76** and a J-Lock spring **78** keeps the J-Lock male attachment assembly **80** of the connecting rod **30** in place once it has been engaged with the terminal weighting element **32**. (Locked arrangement shown in FIG. **11**).

The illustrative J-Lock female attachment assembly **70** further includes a lower plunger **82**, an inner spring **84**, and a spring washer **86** which cooperate to absorb the impact of the lower translating assembly (that is, the translating combination of the control rods **18**, the terminal weighting element **32**, the connecting rod **30**, and optionally a lead screw (not shown)) during a SCRAM.

The illustrative J-Lock connection between the lower end of the connecting rod **30** and the terminal weighting element **32** is an example. More generally, substantially any type of connection, including another type of detachable connection or a permanently welded connection or an integral arrangement, is contemplated. The J-Lock arrangement has the advantage of enabling the connecting rod **30** to be detached from the terminal weighting element **32** (and, hence, from the control rods **18**) by a simple “push-and-twist” operation. This allows the connecting rod **30** to be moved separately from the remainder of the translating assembly (that is, the terminal weighting element **32** and the attached control rods **18**) during refueling of the nuclear reactor.

The casing **40** of the terminal weighting element **32** can be manufactured using various techniques. In some embodiments manufacturing employing Electrical Discharge Machining (EDM) is contemplated. The EDM method operates on a solid block of stainless steel which is then cut to define the spider casing **40**. Advantageously, EDM is fast and precise. Other contemplated methods include casting techniques or extrusion, both of which are fast and have low material cost.

The translating assembly comprising the control rods **18**, terminal weighting element **32**, connecting rod **30**, and optionally a lead screw (not illustrated) is advantageously heavy in order to facilitate rapid and reliable SCRAM of the translating assembly toward the reactor core in the event of an emergency reactor shutdown. Toward this end, the terminal weighting element **32** is configured to be heavy. One way disclosed herein to achieve this is by increasing the average density of the terminal weighting element **32** to a value greater than that of stainless steel (or, more generally, increasing its average density to a value greater than that of the material comprising the casing **40**) by the addition of the filler **56** comprising heavy material (where “heavy” denotes a density greater than that of the stainless steel or other material comprising the casing **40**). Another way disclosed herein to achieve this is by elongating the terminal weighting element **32** in the SCRAM direction S. The illustrative terminal weighting element **32** employs both enhanced average density via filler **56** and elongation in the SCRAM direction S.

With reference to FIGS. **10** and **11**, additional weight for the translating assembly is additionally or alternatively obtained by enhancing the density of the connecting rod **30**. Toward this end, the illustrative connecting rod **30** includes a hollow (or partially hollow) connecting rod tube **90** which (as seen in the sectional view of FIG. **11**) contains a filler **92** comprising heavy material. Thus, the connecting rod tube **90** serves the structural purpose analogous to the casing **40** of the terminal weighting element **32**, while the filler **92** comprising heavy material serves a weighting (or average density-enhancing) purpose analogous to the filler **56** of the terminal weighting element **32**. The hollow connecting rod tube **90** can be manufactured using various techniques, such as EDM (although longer tube lengths may be problematic for this approach), casting, extrusion, milling, or so forth.

In one suitable embodiment, the filler **92** comprising heavy material is in the form of tungsten slugs each having a diameter substantially coinciding with an inner diameter of the connecting rod tube **90** and being stacked in the connecting

rod tube **90**, with the number of stacked tungsten slugs being selected to achieve the desired weight. If the number of tungsten slugs is insufficient to fill the interior volume of the connecting rod tube **90** and it is desired to avoid movement of these slugs, then optionally the filler **92** is prevented from shifting by a suitable biasing arrangement or by filling the remaining space within the interior volume of the connecting rod tube **90** with a light weight material such as stainless steel slugs. In the illustrative example of FIG. **11**, a biasing arrangement is employed, in which the interior volume of the connecting rod tube **90** is sealed off by upper and lower welded plugs **94**, **96**, and a compressed spring **98** takes up any slack along the SCRAM direction S that may be introduced by incomplete filling of the interior volume of the connecting rod tube **90** by the filler **92**. Instead of tungsten, the heavy material comprising the filler may be depleted uranium, molybdenum, tantalum, or so forth, by way of some other illustrative examples. The filler **92** may comprise one or more solid slugs or rods, a powder, a granulation, or so forth. In the context of the connecting rod **30**, the term “heavy material” refers to a material having a density that is greater than the density of the stainless steel or other material comprising the connecting rod tube **90**. By way of illustrative example, stainless steel has a density of about 7.5-8.1 grams/cubic centimeter, while tungsten has a density of about 19.2 grams/cubic centimeter and tantalum has a density of about 16.6 grams per cubic centimeter. In some preferred embodiments, the heavy material comprising the filler **92** has a density that is at least twice the density of the material comprising the hollow connecting rod tube **90**. In some preferred embodiments in which the hollow connecting rod tube **90** comprises stainless steel, the heavy material comprising the filler **92** preferably has a density that is at least 16.2 grams per cubic centimeter. (All quantitative densities specified herein are for room temperature.)

With continuing reference to FIGS. **10** and **11**, the illustrative connecting rod **30** has an upper end that includes an annular groove **100** for securing with a latch of the CRDM unit **14** (latch not shown), and a magnet **102** for use in conjunction with a control rod position sensor (not shown). A suitable embodiment of the CRDM unit **14** including a motor/lead screw arrangement for continuous (gray rod) adjustment and a separate latch for detaching the connecting rod **30** from the CRDM unit **14** (with the lead screw remaining operatively connected with the motor) is described in related application Ser. No. 12/722,662 titled “Control Rod Drive Mechanism For Nuclear Reactor” filed Mar. 12, 2010 and related application Ser. No. 12/722,696 titled “Control Rod Drive Mechanism For Nuclear Reactor” filed Mar. 12, 2010, both of which are both incorporated herein by reference in their entireties.

Alternatively, in other embodiments a lead screw (not shown) is secured with or integral with the connecting rod tube **90**, and the lead screw SCRAMS together with the connecting rod/terminal weighting element (or spider)/control rod (in other words, the lead screw forms part of the translating assembly during SCRAM). In some such alternative embodiments, the motor is suitably coupled with the lead screw by a separable ball nut that separates to release the lead screw and initiate SCRAM.

The illustrative connecting rod **30** includes eight components. The weight of the connecting rod **30** assembly is increased by using the hollow connecting rod tube **90**. This may be only partially hollow—for example, only a lower portion may be hollow. Located inside the hollow connecting rod tube **90** is the filler **92** comprising heavy material. In some embodiments, the filler **92** comprises several smaller rods or slugs of tungsten. The number of tungsten rods or slugs inside

the hollow connecting rod tube **90** is selected to achieve a desired weight. If different translating assemblies are employed with different CDRM units, the number of tungsten rods or slugs inside each the hollow connecting rod tube **90** may be different, and selected so as to ensure that each connecting rod of the several CDRM units has the same weight. This is advantageous since it follows that all of the CRDM units can be designed to lift a single weight independent of factors such as connecting rod length, control rod composition, or so forth.

As already noted, such weight “tuning” can also be achieved by adjusting the filler **56** in the terminal weighting element **32**. If both fillers **56**, **92** are employed, then the combined weight of the fillers **56**, **92** can be tuned by adjusting the amount and/or density of either one, or both, of the fillers **56**, **92**. If the amount of weight tuning is expected to be small, then in some such embodiments the fillers **56**, **92** may be solid elements of standard size/weight, and the total weight may then be trimmed by adding additional filler comprising heavy material in the form of a powder, granulation, small slug or slugs, or so forth.

If the interior volume of the hollow connecting rod tube **90** is only partially filled by the filler **92**, then stainless steel rods or some other light weight filler (not shown) may be inserted into the remaining interior volume to fill complete the filling. Additionally or alternatively, the spring **98** or another mechanical biasing arrangement may be employed. It is contemplated to have the filler **92** arranged “loosely” in the rod tube **90**; however, such an arrangement may complicate absorption of kinetic energy at the termination of a SCRAM drop.

The filler **92** generally has a lower coefficient of thermal expansion than the stainless steel (or other material) of the hollow connecting rod tube **90**. The connecting rod **30** is assembled at room temperature, and then heated to its operating temperature. For a connecting rod having a length of, e.g. 250 centimeters or greater, the thermal expansion will result in the rod tube **90** increasing by an amount of order a few centimeters or more. The lower coefficient of thermal expansion of the filler **92** results in a substantially lower length increase of the filler **92**. The spring **98** suitably compensates for this effect. Additionally, if the spring **98** is located below the filler **92** (as shown in FIG. **11**), then it can assist in dissipating the kinetic energy of the filler **92** at the termination of the SCRAM drop.

As shown in the illustrative embodiment depicted in FIG. **11**, the hollow connecting rod tube **90** may be less than the total length of the connecting rod **30**. In the illustrated case, the connecting rod **30** includes additional length below the rod tube **90** corresponding to the J-Lock male attachment assembly **80**, and also includes additional length above the rod tube **90** corresponding to an upper tube that includes the latch groove **100** and houses the position indicator magnet **102**. The upper and lower welded plugs **94**, **96** are optionally provided to seal off the interior volume of the hollow connecting rod tube **90**. These plugs **94**, **96** are attached to the upper and lower ends, respectively of the hollow connecting rod tube **90** so as to seal the filler **92** and the optional spring **98** inside. In the illustrative embodiment, the outer ends of the plugs **94**, **96** are configured to facilitate connection of the upper connecting rod and the J-lock male attachment assembly **80**, respectively.

The connecting rod **30** also has a substantial advantage in that it places the filler **92** comprising heavy material between the radioactive core (contained in or supported by the core former **12** located proximate to the bottom of the pressure vessel **10** as shown in FIG. **1**) and the CRDM unit **14**. The

heavy material comprising the filler **92** is a dense material which can generally be expected to be highly absorbing for radiation generated by the reactor core. High radiation absorption is a property of heavy materials such as tungsten, depleted uranium, molybdenum, or tantalum, by way of illustrative example. Thus, the filler **92** comprising heavy material provides radiation shielding that protects the expensive and (in some embodiments and to various extent) radiation-sensitive CRDM unit **14**. If both fillers **56**, **92** are used, then both fillers contribute to this advantageous CRDM shielding effect.

The illustrative control rod/CRDM coupling includes a combination of (1) the terminal weighting element **32** including elongation and the filler **56**, and (2) the connecting rod **30** including the filler **92**.

In other control rod/CRDM coupling embodiments it is contemplated to include a combination of the terminal weighting element **32** including elongation and the filler **56** but coupled with a conventional solid stainless steel connecting rod (without the filler **92**).

In other control rod/CRDM coupling embodiments it is contemplated to include a combination of a terminal element (which may or may not be a weighting element) including elongation but without the filler **56**, coupled either with (i) the connecting rod **30** including the filler **92** or (ii) a conventional solid stainless steel connecting rod (without the filler **92**).

In other control rod/CRDM coupling embodiments it is contemplated to include a combination of a terminal weighting element without elongation (for example, having a “spider” topology similar to a conventional spider) but which includes the filler **56** disposed in hollow regions of the tubes or other members of the terminal weighting element, coupled either with (i) the connecting rod **30** including the filler **92** or (ii) a conventional solid stainless steel connecting rod (without the filler **92**).

In other control rod/CRDM coupling embodiments it is contemplated to include a combination of (I) a conventional spider without elongation and without the filler **56** and (II) the connecting rod **30** including the filler **92**.

The preferred embodiments have been illustrated and described. Obviously, modifications and alterations will occur to others upon reading and understanding the preceding detailed description. It is intended that the invention be construed as including all such modifications and alterations insofar as they come within the scope of the appended claims or the equivalents thereof.

We claim:

1. A control rod/control rod drive mechanism (CRDM) coupling comprising:
 - a connecting rod operatively connected with a CRDM unit to provide at least one of gray rod control functionality and shutdown rod control functionality; and
 - a terminal element connected with a lower end of the connecting rod, the terminal element including a casing defining at least one cavity and a filler disposed in the at least one cavity, the filler comprising heavy material having a higher density than a material comprising the casing, the terminal element further connected with an upper end of at least one control rod.
2. The control rod/CRDM coupling as set forth in claim 1, wherein the material comprising the casing is stainless steel.
3. The control rod/CRDM coupling as set forth in claim 2, wherein the terminal element has an average density that is greater than the density of stainless steel.
4. The control rod/CRDM coupling as set forth in claim 2, wherein the heavy material has a density of at least 16.2 grams per cubic centimeter at room temperature.

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5. The control rod/CRDM coupling as set forth in claim 2, wherein the heavy material is selected from a group consisting of tungsten, depleted uranium, molybdenum, and tantalum.

6. The control rod/CRDM coupling as set forth in claim 2, wherein the filler comprises heavy material in the form of a powder or granulation.

7. The control rod/CRDM coupling as set forth in claim 1, wherein the heavy material has a density that is at least twice the density of the material comprising the casing.

8. The control rod/CRDM coupling as set forth in claim 1, wherein the terminal element further includes one or more casing cover plates that seal the at least one cavity of the casing.

9. The control rod/CRDM coupling as set forth in claim 1, wherein the terminal element has elongation in a SCRAM direction that is at least as large as a largest dimension of the terminal element transverse to the SCRAM direction.

10. The control rod/CRDM coupling as set forth in claim 1, wherein a cross-section of the terminal element oriented broadside to a SCRAM direction has an area fill factor of at least 50%.

11. The control rod/CRDM coupling as set forth in claim 1, wherein the connecting rod comprises a hollow connecting rod tube and a filler disposed in the hollow connecting rod tube, the filler comprising heavy material having a higher density than a material comprising the hollow connecting rod tube.

12. The control rod/CRDM coupling as set forth in claim 1, further comprising a J-Lock coupling connecting the terminal element with the lower end of the connecting rod.

13. An apparatus comprising:

a nuclear reactor pressure vessel; and

a control rod assembly including at least one movable control rod comprising a neutron absorbing material, a control rod drive mechanism (CRDM) for controlling movement of the at least one control rod, and a coupling operatively connecting the at least one control rod and the CRDM, the coupling including a connecting rod

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engaged with the CRDM and a terminal element connected with a lower end of the connecting rod, the terminal element including a first portion comprising a first material having a first density and a second portion comprising a second material having a second density that is greater than the first density, the terminal element further connecting with the at least one control rod, wherein the connecting rod is detachably engaged with the CRDM such that detachment of the detachable engagement causes a translating assembly including at least the connecting rod, the terminal element, and the at least one control rod to fall toward a reactor core disposed in a lower region of the nuclear reactor pressure vessel, and wherein the first portion of the terminal element supports or contains the second portion of the terminal element.

14. An apparatus comprising:

a nuclear reactor pressure vessel; and

a control rod assembly including at least one movable control rod comprising a neutron absorbing material, a control rod drive mechanism (CRDM) for controlling movement of the at least one control rod, and a coupling operatively connecting the at least one control rod and the CRDM, the coupling including a connecting rod engaged with the CRDM and a terminal element connected with a lower end of the connecting rod, the terminal element including a first portion comprising a first material having a first density and a second portion comprising a second material having a second density that is greater than the first density, the terminal element further connecting with the at least one control rod, wherein the first portion of the terminal element comprises a steel enclosure enclosing the second portion of the terminal element.

15. The apparatus as set forth in claim 14, wherein the second density is at least 16.2 grams per cubic centimeter at room temperature.

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